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ABSTRACT

The environment in which Texas children grow up is crucial to their future and to the future of the state. Almost 500,000 Texas families were poor in 1985. Poverty sets the stage for numerous childhood maladies: infant mortality, health problems, child abuse, learning disabilities, malnutrition, and mental health problems. As poor children grow up they are likely to drop out of school, become pregnant at an early age, abuse drugs and alcohol, depend on public assistance, or break the law. Many of these problems are preventable. It costs less than $39,000 to provide one child with a continuum of preventive services beginning with prenatal and preventive health care and continuing with Head Start, Chapter I Compensatory Education, summer jobs for high school students, and four years of college paid at public expense. Contrast that with the $25,000 it costs each year to keep one juvenile offender in a Texas training school. Prevention is more cost-effective than remedial treatment. Child abuse is likely to increase in the next decade due to the significant number of families living below the poverty line. Due to limited funding less than one-half of serious child abuse cases in the past 6 years were investigated. When abused and troubled children become parents, they tend to perpetuate self-destructive conditions with their own children. Early intervention could break this cycle. Enacting legislation that focuses on prevention is one way of strengthening the commitment to the positive growth and development of Texas children. (ABL)

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FACTS ABOUT TEXAS CHILDREN

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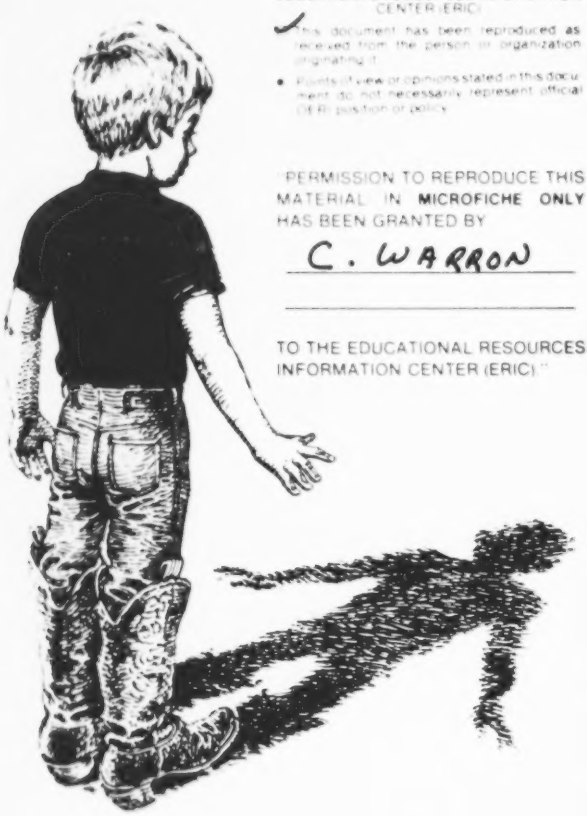

Excerpted from

CHILDREN, CHOICES, AND CHANGE

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Editor's note

Children, Choices, and Change, written by Lowren Connie Harris, is the title of a fact book about Texas' youngest citizens. Problem areas affecting childhood—including abuse, health and delivery of care, education, poverty, social services, and child care—are documented in material gathered from many sources.

This pamphlet is excerpted from that book and features the section on "Abused and Troubled Children." Inquiries about *Children, Choices, and Change* should be addressed to the Hogg Foundation Publications Division, Box 7998, Austin, TX 78713. The price of the book is $3.00 plus 50 cents handling and postage.

The environment in which Texas children grow up is crucial to their future and to the future of the state. Far too many of these children live in poverty; almost one-half million Texas families were poor in 1985. Poverty sets the stage for numerous childhood maladies: infant mortality, health problems, child abuse, learning disabilities, malnutrition, and mental health problems. As poor children grow up, they are likely to drop out of school, become pregnant at an early age, abuse drugs and alcohol, depend on public assistance, or break the law. Almost 20 percent of the state's population is poor, and a black or Hispanic child is twice as likely to be poor as an Anglo child.

Many of the childhood maladies and potential consequences of a poor background are preventable. For example, high quality, comprehensive early childhood development programs such as Head Start help disadvantaged, poor children compensate for the adverse effects of poverty. Since 1965, the federal Head Start program has helped low-income children expand their abilities to think, reason, and speak clearly, thus providing the children with greater confidence, self-respect, and ability to compete in later education and work environments.

As the Committee for Economic Development, a national group of concerned businessmen, observed, "...If the nation defers the expense of preventive programs during the formative years, it will incur much higher and more intractable costs for older children who have already experienced failure."

It costs less than $39,000 to provide one child with a continuum of preventive services beginning with prenatal and preventive health care and continuing with Head Start, Chapter I Compensatory Education, summer jobs for

high school students, and four years of college paid at public expense. Contrast that sum with the $25,000 each year it costs to keep one juvenile offender in a Texas training school. Obviously, prevention is far more cost-effective than remedial treatment.

Texas society unfortunately is still struggling with many of the same problems it faced a decade ago: unemployment, insufficient parenting skills and parenting education, increased numbers of working mothers with a need for quality child care, rising statistics on child abuse and neglect, increasing incidence of alcohol and drug abuse among children, rising rate of juvenile delinquency, inadequate prenatal and perinatal health care, and continuing numbers of teenage pregnancies and school dropouts.

Many of these problems are documented in the book, *Children, Choices, and Change: An Adaptation of the Darker Side of Childhood*, a compilation of facts about Texas children gathered from federal and state government reports, national foundations, unpublished research, local area needs assessments, population databases, independent research, newspaper articles, published journals, and correspondence with experts from various fields.

Each chapter of this book is a snapshot of the circumstances surrounding Texas children from birth through 12 years of age. The first section is "A Texas Profile," citing changes in the state's population, economy, and workforce; "Families in Poverty" chronicles problems of the growing underclass; "Services" notes improvements needed to meet the needs of poor children and their families. "Health" focuses on every child's needs for becoming mentally and physically strong; "Education" targets the disadvantaged and the special needs of minority students; "Abused

and Troubled Children" describes those who are often overlooked for lack of adequate protective services; and "Child Care" targets the working mother and the unattended child. The final chapter, "Toward Prevention," points to policies, programs, and services that can substantially improve the lives of many Texas children while reducing the need for costly expenditures in later years.

The following excerpt is of the chapter, "Abused and Troubled Children," which provides information about distressed families, runaways, and victims of abuse. This abuse does not happen in a vacuum. As the chapter will indicate, family settings where one or both parents are unemployed, illiterate, homeless, hungry, and frustrated often provide the medium for abuse.

ABUSED AND TROUBLED CHILDREN

Only ten years ago abused and troubled children were labeled "hidden children," living silently behind closed doors. Today this is no longer the case. In 1986 alone, an estimated 419,000 Texas children were reported as being at risk of being abused, neglected or both.

While child abuse is not restricted to any particular group, it is seen more frequently in families where parents are troubled by alcoholism, drug abuse, marital strife, low self-esteem, and joblessness. Given the significant number of Texas families living below the poverty level, the probability of child abuse and neglect is likely to increase over the next decade.

A poor family becomes a marginal family, socially isolated from the larger community. As this social isolation grows, it hinders a family's ability to solve life's problems, which may range from being unable to obtain adequate food, rest, and recreation to being unable to affirm one's sense of self-worth. These feelings can spill over to the children. Particularly in the case of immigrants, the failure to thrive successfully in their new country may result in bitterness and frustration, generating a context for abusive behavior.

Most abused children are of preschool age, a time in the life cycle when humans are by nature innocent, naive, and vulnerable to the external forces around them.

In the past six years, only the most serious child abuse cases were investigated, and of these less than half received social services. With limited funding, there are longer delays in responding to reports and a greater chance of careless and inadequate investigations, reporting, and follow-up.

At a time when reports of child abuse have quadrupled, Texas Child Protective Services experienced a 26 percent reduction in staff due to budgetary restrictions. The result is an imbalance in staff-to-client ratio which will force the state to direct its efforts toward crisis intervention rather than prevention and treatment.

The cost to Texas society as a whole is tremendous, for when these children begin to enter adolescence, they are more likely than others to exhibit self-destructive, antisocial behaviors. They may run away, drop out of school, abuse drugs and alcohol, or commit a crime. Nearly one-third of the children who leave home are running away from physical or sexual abuse, and 40 percent are running from other family problems such as parental alcoholism or marital conflict.

If a child remains "on the run," he or she is likely to be homeless. Homeless children are at increased risk of being enticed or coerced into activities such as prostitution or taking drugs. They are more likely to come in contact with the formal juvenile justice system.

When abused and troubled children become parents, they tend to perpetuate self-destructive conditions with their own children. Thirty percent of adults who were extremely neglected or physically or sexually abused as children themselves become abusive parents.

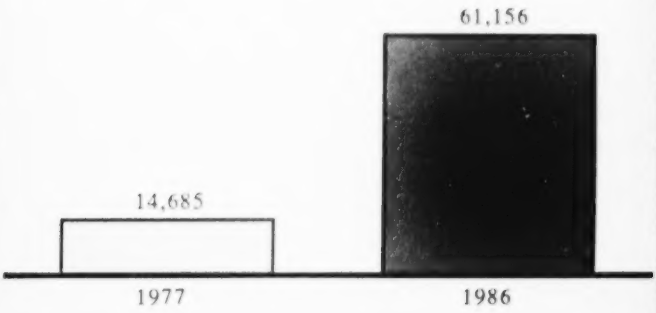
Since studies have shown that there is a generational repetition, early intervention programs stand a good chance of breaking the cycle. Specific actions at the state level could ensure that all families in need of basic life supports receive adequate food, shelter, health care, and opportunities for employment.

1

Confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect in Texas have quadrupled over the last ten years.

In 1977, there were 14,685 confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect. In 1986, there were 61,156 cases. The percentage of confirmed physical neglect reports has been declining in the past few years, but that decrease has been offset by an increase in confirmed reports of physical and sexual abuse. While some of the reporting is attributable to heightened public awareness, there is evidence that the increased number of reports is largely due to a *real* increase in the number of abused and neglected children in Texas.

CONFIRMED
CASES OF CHILD ABUSE
AND NEGLECT IN TEXAS

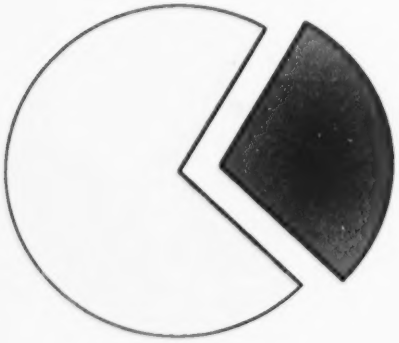


2

Over a one-year period, more than 4,400 Texas babies under 12 months were abused and neglected.

In 1986, one-half of all Texas victims of child abuse and neglect were age six and younger, and 29 percent of these victims were under four years of age. There were 17,778 children under four who were victims of child abuse and neglect.

ABUSED AND NEGLECTED CHILDREN UNDER 18 IN TEXAS



3

Over a two-year period, 2,649 Texas children 12 years old and younger were kidnapped.

Forty-four percent of these children were three to five years of age, 38 percent were six to twelve, and 18 percent were infants, two years of age and under. Between 1986 and 1987, kidnappings of three to five year olds almost doubled.

The majority of these kidnappings are family-related. However, no official figures exist on the number of missing children who are kidnapped by a parent. Between 1986 and 1988, Texas Department of Public Safety Missing Persons Clearinghouse recorded 351 active parental abduction cases.

Noncustodial parental kidnappings adversely affect children's lives by uprooting them from their homes, depriving them of a life with the other parent, and forcing them to live "on the run."

4

Fires set by Texas children under 16 account for $7 to $8 million in property damage every year.

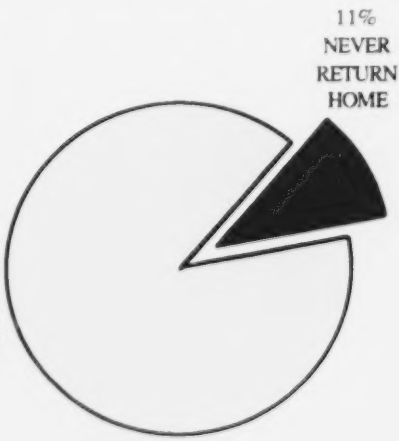
Nationally, juveniles accounted for 40 percent of arson arrests in 1986, with almost 7 percent of those arrests involving children under ten. Arson was the largest single cause of property damage by fire, accounting for more than one of every four dollars lost in buildings which burned. In Texas, arson was the cause of more than $51 million in property damage during 1986.

5

More than 11,000 Texas children ran away from their homes in 1986 and did not return.

In one year, an estimated 100,000 Texas families had at least one child who ran away from home. Very few of these children ever reach public counseling and shelter services. In 1986, 3,606 truant and runaway youths were served by counseling or shelter services around the state.

TEXAS RUNAWAY CHILDREN



CONCLUSION

The chapter on "Abused and Troubled Children" sounds an alarm about the innocence, naivete, and vulnerability of children. It is a response not just to increasing rates of abuse and neglect but to the grave consequences of such abuse. Similar to the other sections of *Children, Choices, and Change*, this chapter reflects a set of underlying themes:

- that life's cards are stacked against youngsters with multiple disadvantages and the "children of these children."

- that poor, underprivileged youth need service interventions that work. Currently, the service system for Texas children is deficient and, in many areas of the state, nonexistent.

- that services targeting high-risk individuals in the early stages of life will be more successful and cost-effective than later remedial programs.

When the long-range financial implications for prevention and remediation are compared, it is difficult to understand why prevention fails to receive sufficient support. Investing as little as $1 has a tremendous influence on the future lives of many poor, disadvantaged children. For example, for every $1 spent on comprehensive prenatal care services, the state saves $2 in health care costs for children receiving Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis and Treatment (EPSDT). And, for every $1 spent on childhood immunization programs, the state saves $10 in later medical costs.

This is a small price--less than it costs to buy a Big Mac, a loaf of bread, or a ticket for a cheap seat in a movie--but the outcome measurably affects how these children live as adults.

And measuring the price of prevention in dollars is only a small part of the benefits a society reaps when disadvantaged children are cared for early in life. The social and human benefits are enormous. Not only do these children grow up healthy but they grow up better able to meet the challenges of tomorrow's world--to hold down a job, raise a family, and handle the daily stresses of life.

Currently, however, many children in Texas still face a darker side of childhood--growing up hungry, homeless, illiterate, and in an environment where anger, hostility, and violence dominate. These conditions seriously threaten the children living under them and the state's collective future.

Enacting legislation that focuses on prevention is one way of strengthening the commitment to the positive growth and development of Texas children. It is a prescription designed to ensure that every child in this state can reach his or her full potential for becoming a strong, healthy, productive, and self-sufficient adult. The children of today--the focus of this book--will become the work force of the 21st century. They will be expected to maintain the state's standard of living as well as bear the nation's enormous debt, while upholding a growing aged and retired population and meeting the increasing challenge of economic competition from abroad. Parents, concerned citizens, and employers cannot afford to ignore or gamble with the future of these children. They are, as Texans often proclaim, "our state's most precious natural resource."

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